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Faxian's (法顯) Worship of Guanshiyin (觀世音) and the *Lotus Sūtra* of 286 (正法華經)¹

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§1.1. Introductory Remarks

Faxian 法顯 (approx. 342–423), the Buddhist monk and pilgrim from China, took an oath with four of his fellow monks in 399 to travel together to Buddha's native country in search of authentic scriptures about Buddhist monastic discipline (*Vinaya* 律藏). According to the rules of Buddhist canon law, a religious order (*Samgha*) can only be formed by a minimum of five monks. Faxian's small *Samgha* had set itself a far off, unknown travel destination which seemed just about impossible to reach. No traveler had ever managed to advance into the center of Indian culture to the extent that Faxian did,² not even the two Han–Dynasty envoys Zhang Qian 張騫 and Gan Ying 甘英 sent off by the Emperor to travel the Western territories of China.³

During his six year long trip, Faixian lost three of his four companions. The first, a young monk (Huiwei 慧嵬), had to turn back to Turfan (then under Chinese control) during the early stages of the journey due to a lack of supplies. Another monk (Huiying 慧應) lost his life in Puruṣapura (Gandhāra), while the third (Huijing 慧景) did not survive the passage of a snow-covered mountain between Nagarahāra and Luoyi.⁴ Only Faxian and Daozheng 道整 finally arrived in Central India, which they called “Zhongguo” 中國 (Country in the Center) in accordance with the Buddhist tradition. Elated, the two monks visited all Buddhist pilgrimage sites; they were the first Chinese to come into direct contact with Indian society and with the local Buddhists. Initially, they were ashamed of their country of origin, which the Buddhist tradition situates at the periphery or “*Biandi*” 邊地, and in which one is reborn

¹. This paper is based on a lecture given on 24 September 2013 at the 32nd Conference of German Orientalists in Münster. It is part of a series of papers on Faxian and his *Foguoji* (佛國記), see Hu–von Hinüber 2010, 2011, 2013 and 2014.

². In the 3rd century, very few travelers before Faxian had made it until the Chinese border town of Dunhuang 敦煌 and the Turfan oasis (高昌 Gaochang), even until the kingdom Shanshan 鄯善 or the Mahāyāna Center Khotan 和闐 in Central Asia. Among them was Zhu Shixing 朱士行 (203–282), who travelled to Khotan in 260 in search of Mahāyāna scriptures.

³. On Zhang Qian, who travelled the Western territories of China twice in 138 und 119 B.C. on the orders of the Emperor, and on Gan Ying, who undertook a similar mission in 97 A.D., cf. Geng 1991: 2f. 《史記•西南夷列傳•大宛列傳》 and 《後漢書•西域傳•安息傳》; cf. also Mather 1992 and Hu–von Hinüber 2010: 422.

⁴. On the fate of these three companions of Faxian, Huiwei, Huiying und Huijing, cf. Hu–von Hinüber 2014 §2.1.b, §3.2, §4.1 and §4.3.

only because of the bad Karma of a previous birth.⁵

Faxian spent three years learning Sanskrit in Central India and acquired a series of scriptures of various Buddhist schools, which he translated upon his return to China. His compatriot Daozheng 道整, however, decided to stay forever in the land of the Buddha, in order to achieve the buddhahood in *Zhongguo* through rebirth. Faxian therefore faced the daunting journey back home to China alone, with his aim of making the authentic Sūtras available to Chinese Buddhist communities.

He decided to venture home by ship. Even though Faxian did not explain his preference for the maritime route on his homeward journey, the description of his travels through the desert, over the Pamir mountains and across the Indus made it clear that surviving such a journey alone would be a near impossible feat. Yet the voyage over the “boundless” ocean (大海無邊) was perhaps no less dangerous, despite the fact that China and South Asia had been engaged in maritime trading since the 2nd century. Faxian completed his journey in four stages:⁶

- (1) Pātaliputra → Gaṅgā → Tāmralipti (pause of two years)
- (2) Tāmralipti → 14 days → Siṁhaladvīpa/Ceylon (pause of two years)
- (3) Ceylon → 2+13+90 = 105 days → Sumātra (pause of five months)
- (4) Sumātra → 70+12 = 82 days → Qingzhou 青州 (China)

During the third and fourth stages of his journey in between Ceylon and China, the merchant ship (*yānapatra*),⁷ which the old Chinese monk had boarded, found itself in difficulty. During this moment of distress, Faxian prayed to the Buddhist divinity Guanshiyin 觀世音 (Avalokiteśvara) asking for protection and blessing. The present study attempts to analyze which canonical scriptures provided the foundation or the influence for his prayers. This analysis involves four elements:

- (a) Faxian’s description of his first and second incident of distress at sea (§2):
 - text analysis and translation;
- (b) On the two translations of the Lotus Sūtra (§3):
 - the version by Dharmarakṣa known as 正法華經 and
 - the version by Kumārajīva known as 妙法蓮花經;
- (c) Comparative text analysis of the *Foguoji* with the Lotus Sūtra of 286 (§4):
 - comparison of the phrases and of the wording;
- (d) Remarks on the Guanshiyin worship of the early 5th century in India and China (§5)

§2. Faxian’s repeated prayer to Guanshiyin 觀世音

§2.1. The first moment of distress: struggle for survival on the high seas

The first time that Faxian’s ship was in distress occurred between Ceylon and Sumātra. On the third day after setting off from Siṁhaladvīpa, the merchant vessel chanced upon a tempest which raged on for thirteen days. The ship, which was equipped with a lifeboat,

⁵. For details on Faxian’s usage of the term “Zhongguo” 中國 in terms of “Buddhist center” and “Biandi” 邊地 meaning “peripheral areas of Buddhism” see Hu-von Hintüber 2011: 231–236.

⁶. I discussed the maritime trade between China and South Asia, known to have flourished already in the Eastern Han-Dynasty 東漢 (2nd century) in 2010: 423–424 and 2011: 240.

⁷. On Indian sailing vessels see Schlingloff 1976 and 1982.

sprung a leak and was flooded with water. The small boat, attached to the ship with a rope, was put to use with great difficulty. Faxian describes this scene as a breathtaking struggle for survival on the high seas:

得此梵本已，即載商人大舶。上可有二百餘人，後係一小舶。海行艱嶮，以備大舶毀壞。
得好信風東下。三日便值大風。舶漏水入。商人欲趣小舶。小舶上人恐人來多，即砍絇斷。商人大怖，命在須臾。恐舶水滿，即取龕財貨擲著水中。法顯亦以君墀及澡罐并餘物棄擲海中，但恐商人擲去經像，唯一心念觀世音及歸命漢地眾僧：我遠行求法，愿威神歸流，得到所止。如是大風晝夜十三日，到一島邊。[佛國記T51:865c26–866a6]

Having obtained these Sanskrit scriptures, I immediately boarded a large merchant ship. Trailing a little boat, it carried around two hundred passengers. Because of the dangers of the maritime navigation, the (tender) serves as a precaution in case the big vessel should be damaged. A favourable Monsoon wind was blowing us towards the East, yet after only three days, we encountered a powerful storm. The ship sprung a leak and water started flooding in. The merchants (all) wanted to climb into the little boat; but the people on the lifeboat, afraid that too many would come, cut through the rope. The merchants were struck by terror, fearing for their lives. Alarmed that the ship would be fully flooded, they immediately grabbed the heavy goods and cast them overboard. I also, Faxian, took up my water jar⁸, wash pan with some other objects and threw them into the ocean; but fearing that the merchants would through the Sūtras and Buddha's portraits overboard, **I concentrated with all my heart on Guanshiyin** and took refuge with the Samghas in China,⁹ (saying) "I have travelled far in search of Buddhist Law. May the mighty Gods tame the waves, so that we arrive at our goal". In this way, the storm continued for thirteen days and nights, until we reached an island.¹⁰

After some emergency measures were taken to repair the damaged hull, the sea voyage continued.¹¹ 90 days later, the ship ran ashore on the land of Yepoti 耶婆提 (presumably Yavadvīpa on Sumātra).

§2.2. The second moment of distress : death threats against Faxian

On Sumātra, Faxian waited for five months, before another merchant ship took him on board. The ship's goal was Guangzhou 廣州 in Southern China, and the seamen carried supplies and drinking water for 50 days. One month into the journey, this ship also got caught up in a tempest. The superstitious merchants, whom Faxian called "Brahmins" (婆羅門), blamed the old monk for the misfortune and planned to put him down on some island-shore in the ocean. Faxian describes how the situation on board escalated:

⁸. On the term 君墀, which renders *kundikā* in Sanskrit, cf. Legge 1886: 112; Zhang 1985: 168 and Deeg 2005:572.

⁹. 歸命漢地眾僧 "taking refuge with the Samghas in China" is apparently a variant of threefold appeal to Buddha, Dharma and Samgha (*triśaranya-gamana* 三歸依), caused by the situation of being homeward bound. Cf. Hirakawa 1997 s.v. 歸命.

¹⁰. My interpretation of the last sentence differs from that of Legge 1886: 112 "Let me, by your dread and supernatural (power), return from my wanderings, and reach my resting-place! In this way the tempest continued day and night, till on the thirteenth day the ship was carried to the side of an island". Deeg 2005: 573 also did not understand 歸 *gui* as verb meaning "tame (the waves)" in this context.

¹¹. 866a6–7: 潮退之後，見船漏處，即補塞之，於是復前。

夜鼓二時，遇黑風暴雨。商人賈客皆悉惶怖。法顯爾時亦一心念觀世音及漢地眾僧；蒙威神祐，得至天曉。曉已，諸婆羅門議言：坐載此沙門，使我不利，遭此大苦。當下比丘，置海島邊。不可為一人令我等危險。法顯檀越言：汝若下此比丘，亦并下我！不爾，便當殺我。如其下此沙門，吾到漢地當向國王言汝也！漢地王亦敬信佛法、重比丘僧。諸商人躊躇，不敢便下。[佛國記T51:866a17–26]

As the night-drum had struck the second hour, we were met by a black storm with tempestuous rain. All of the merchants and passengers started to panic. In this moment, I, Faxian, again concentrated with all my heart on the (prayer to) Guanshiyin and the Samghas in China; through their dread and the protection by Gods, we survived the time until the break of dawn. After day-break, the Brahmins deliberated among themselves and said: that we took this monk on board with us has caused our bad luck and led us into this calamity. We should therefore land this monk onto an Island; we must not for the sake of one person put ourselves into such dangerous situation. Faxian's patron (*dānapati*) replied: "If you abandon this monk, then you must throw me overboard as well! If not, then you must kill me. Otherwise, if you throw this monk overboard, I will submit a complaint about you to the Emperor once we arrive in China. The Chinese Emperor believes also devoutly the Buddhist teachings (Buddhadharma) and greatly values the monastic order (Bhikṣusamgha)". The merchants hereupon hesitated and did not dare immediately to abandon me.

After this presentation of Faxian's travel accounts in the Foguoji, we can now turn to the Lotus Sūtra.

§3.1. Faxian and the two Chinese translations of the Lotus Sūtra

In the Lotus Sūtra, one of the early Mahāyāna scriptures, there is one chapter dedicated to the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Guanshiyin). This Sūtra suggests to make an appeal to Guanshiyin in moments of distress including at high seas. Two versions of the Lotus Sūtra, transmitted in the Chinese Buddhist canon, were translated into Chinese before or during Faxian's lifetime.¹²

- (a) by Dharmarakṣa (Zhu Fahu 竹法護, approx. 231–308) translated in 286: 《正法華經》 [T 263]
- (b) by Kumārajīvas (Jiumouluoshi 鳩摩羅什, approx. 334–413) translated in 406: 《妙法蓮花經》 [T 262]

Could Faxian have known about the translation by Kumārajīvas¹³ from the year 406, which later became the standard translation in China and in Japan? The historical facts tell us that Faxian was still on his journey in India in 406.¹⁴ This is why the following analysis is based on the earlier Chinese translation of the Lotus Sūtra, namely the one by Dharmarakṣa.

^{12.} Dharmarakṣa's translation is generally known as *Zheng-Fa-Hua-Jing* 《正法華經》, because he translated *sad-* in the Sanskrit title *Saddharmapundarīkasūtra* as 正 *zheng* "right" and *-pundarīka-* in a shortened version as 華 *hua* "blossom". Kumārajīva's translation, undertaken 120 years later, is referred to as *Miao-Fa-Lianhua-Jing* 《妙法蓮花經》 because he translated *sad-* as 妙 *miao* "wonderful" and *-pundarīka-* in its complete version as 蓮花 *lianhuā* "lotus blossom". On this Sūtra in general cf. Teiser&Stone 2009: 1–61.

^{13.} On Kumārajīva cf. Tang 1997: 194f. and Zürcher 2007: 236f.

^{14.} After his 14 years long journey to India Faxian landed in Qingzhou 青州 (in today's Province Shandong 山東) in 412. From there he was directly invited to Jiankang 建康 (today's Nanjing 南京) to the monastery Daochangsi 道場寺, without being able, as he had intended, to travel to Chang'an 長安, where Kumārajīva spent the rest of his life (401–413).

§3.2. Influence of the 《正法華經》 on early Guanshiyin cult in China

It can be safely assumed that Dharmarakṣa's translation was already widely available in China before Faxian departed for India in 399, 113 years after Dharmarakṣa completed his translation. As reported by Sengyou 僧祐 (approx. 445–518), the translation 《正法華經》 received from the outset much attention.¹⁵

According to the latest research one can assume that the worship of Guanyin was triggered in China actually by Dharmarakṣa's translation of the Lotus Sūtra. From the Eastern Jin period (東晉) alone, which ran from 317 until 420, we know of more than 35 collections of scriptures about the miracles of Guanyin (觀音應驗記).¹⁶ It would therefore be false to attribute Faxian's two appeals to Guanshiyin as a mere example of “popular Chinese piety” of that time. In fact, the roots of Faxian's behavior during maritime distress can be traced back to the influence of Dharmarakṣa's Lotus Sūtra.¹⁷

§4. Comparative text analysis of the 《佛國記》 and the 《正法華經》

The wording of both passages in the Foguoji, which recount Faxian's prayers to Guanshiyin, shows clear parallels to the canonical scripture on the worship of Avalokiteśvara in the 《正法華經》. In the same way, similar wording with regard to the description of the dangerous ocean can be read in both texts:

[佛國記 T51:866a7–14]

海中多有抄賊，遇輒無全。大海瀰漫無邊，不識東西。唯望日、月、星宿而進。若陰雨時，為逐風而去，亦無所准。當夜闇時，但見大浪相搏晃若¹⁸火色、鼈、鼉、水性怪異之屬。商人荒懼，不知那向。海深無底，又無下石住處。至天晴已，乃知東西，還復望正而進。若值伏石，則無活路。

There are many pirates on the sea. If one encounters them, then the whole (crew) will perish. The great ocean spreads itself out endlessly, so that one has no sense of direction. Only by observing the sun, moon and stars was it possible to proceed on course. If it is cloudy and rainy, (the ship) is driven onwards by the wind without any guidance. In the darkness after the nighttime, one only sees the great waves wrestling each other and emitting a bright color like that of fire, with giant turtles, crocodiles and other sea monsters. (In such a situation) the merchants became very frightened and didn't know in which direction they should navigate. Because of the depth of the bottomless ocean, there is nowhere to drop the (perpender) stone. The right direction can only be found again when the sky becomes light. Then the (seamen) can reorient (the ship) and navigate it in the right direction. If she collides with any hidden rock, there is no way to survive.

The Guanshiyin chapter of the Lotus Sūtra¹⁹ mentions seven emergency situations (七難

¹⁵. See 《出三藏記集》*Chu Sanzang Jiji* T55: 56c–57a: 施檀大會，講誦此經，竟日盡夜，無不咸歡。On Dharmarakṣa's importance for the dissemination of Buddhism in China cf. Sengyou T55:97f.: (竺法護)孜孜所務，唯以弘通為業，終身譯寫，勞不告倦。經法所以廣流中華者，護之力也。See also Tang 1997: 110–115, Zürcher 2007:65f. and Boucher 2006. On other early Mahāyāna scriptures in relation to the Guanyin cult cf. Yü 2001: 31f.

¹⁶. See Lee 2000: 10–13.

¹⁷. On the open discussion in this regard cf. Deeg 2005: 572.

¹⁸. Zhang 1985: 167 (note 22) reads 晃然。

¹⁹. Cf. Wogihara&Tsuchida 1958: 362f.: chapter 24: Avalokiteśvara–vikurvanya–nirdeśah (觀世音菩薩普門

sapta–antarāya), from which Guanshiyin protects those who whisper him and call out his name. Water is the second of the 七難 mentioned after fire:

[正法華經 T9: 129a2–10]

若入大海，百千億垓眾生豪賤處海深淵無底之源，採致金銀雜珠、明月如意寶珠、水精琉璃、車磲馬瑙、珊瑚琥珀，載滿船寶。假使風吹其船流墮黑山迴波，若經鬼界、值摩羯魚，眾中一人竊獨心念光世音菩薩功德威神而稱名號，皆得解脫一切眾患，及其伴侶眾得濟渡，不遇諸魔邪鬼之厄。故名光世音。²⁰

Imagine that millions upon millions of people set out into the deep and bottomless ocean in order to search gold, silver and different pearls; the legendary wish-pearl like the bright moon; crystal and lapis lazuli; mother of pearl and agate; coral and amber; and their ship was fully loaded with those treasures. Suppose a powerful tempest had shipwrecked their vessel in whirling waves like black mountains, crossing the area of demons Yakṣa and encountering the fish-devils Makara. If only one person among the crew prayers to the dread and goodness of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and calls out his name, all of passengers would be freed from the distress and demons. Because of this (mastery) he is called Avalokiteśvara.

Comparison of phrasing and wording

Example 1: Description of the dangerous ocean	
佛國記	正法華經
<p>海中多有抄賊，遇輒無全。大海瀾漫無邊，不識東西。唯望日、月、星宿而進。若陰雨時，為逐風而去，亦無所准。當夜闇時，但見大浪相搏晃若火色、龜、鼈、水性怪異之屬。商人荒懼，不知那向。海深無底，又無下石住處。至天晴已，乃知東西，還復望正而進。若值伏石，則無活路。</p>	
Example 2: Appeal to Guanshiyin through a single person in a group which is in an emergency situation.	
佛國記	正法華經
(法顯) 唯一心念觀世音及歸命漢地眾僧：我遠行求法，願威神歸流，得到所止。法顯爾時亦一心念觀世音及漢地眾僧，蒙威神祐，得至天曉。	眾中一人竊獨心念光世音菩薩功德威神而稱名號，皆得解脫一切眾患及其伴侶。眾得濟渡，不遇諸魔邪鬼之厄。故名光世音。
<p><i>Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra²¹</i> <i>sacet punah kulaputra sāgara-madhye ... sa potas teṣāṁ kālikā-vātena rākṣasīdvīpe kṣiptah syāt tasmiṁs ca ca kaś-cid evaikah sattvah syāt yo 'valokiteśvarasya bodhisattvasya mahāsattvasya' ākrandam kuryāt sarve te parimucyerāms tasmād rākṣasī-dvīpāt.</i></p>	

品).

²⁰. The origins of this most import deity of the Mahāyāna Buddhism lie within the ancient Indian cultural sphere. The appellation „Guan(shi)yin“ is based on a linguistic misunderstanding of the Sanskrit name „Avalokiteśvara“. The real meaning of „Avalokiteśvara“ is, however, not clear. On 光世音 Guangshiyin cf. Karashima 1998:170 s.v. and 2009:40f.

²¹. Ed. Wogihara/Tsuchida 1958:362. On the recent survey of the Lotus Sūtra cf. von Hinüber 2012 and 2013.

§5. The worship of Guanshiyin during the early 5th century in India and China

Both passages from the *Foguoji* (composed in 414–416) discussed above have put one of the oldest sources about the early practice of Guanshiyin worship into connection with distress at sea. Thus, Faxian's travel account is the oldest concrete proof of such an appeal to Avalokiteśvaras through a Chinese Buddhist. It is most probably that this kind of the Guanshiyin worship was already practiced in a widespread manner in China between the 4th and 5th century. Furthermore, it is interesting to read how Faxian described the practice of Indian Buddhism after his arrival in Mathurā. In the passage from the *Foguoji* cited below we find what is apparently the oldest written record of Guanshiyin worship in India during the early 5th century.

阿毘曇師者供養阿毘曇，律師者供養律。年年一供養，各自有日。摩訶衍人則供養般若波羅蜜、文殊師利、觀世音等。[佛國記T51:866a17–26]

The professors of the Abhidharma (*abhidharma-dharas*) make their offerings to the (scriptures of the) Abhidharma; those of the Vinaya (*vinayadharas*) adored the (scriptures of the) Vinaya. Every year there is one such offering, and each class has its own day for it. Adherents of the Mahāyāna (school) present offerings to the *Prajñā-pāramitā*, to Mañjuśrī, and to Guanshiyin. [cf. Legge 1886:46]

The gender transformation of the originally male Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara to the female Guanshiyin is, however, deals with an issue of the sinicization of Buddhism; this occurred, due to the influence of popular beliefs in China, in the later Song dynasty (宋朝960–1279)²². It is therefore incorrect to assert that Faxian, who lived many centuries before the Song dynasty, prayed to the female Guanyin.²³

According to Huijiao's (慧皎 approx. 497–554), the Indian monk Gunabhadra 求那跋陀羅 (394–468), who arrived in Guangzhou (廣州) in 435, appealed also to Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara during his sea voyage from Ceylon to China, when there was neither wind at sea nor drinking water on-board:²⁴

跋那前到獅子諸國，皆傳送資供，既有緣東方，乃隨舶汎海。中途風止，淡水復竭，舉舶憂惶。跋陀曰：“可同心并力念十方佛，稱觀世音，何往不惑？”俄而，信風暴至，密雲降雨，一舶蒙濟，其誠感如此。²⁵

In this connection, it should be reminded on the early relief found in Aurangabad (near by Ajanṭā) which depicts the worship on the Avalokiteśvara (approx. 6. century) as investigated by D. Schlingloff.²⁶

²². On the worship of Guanyin in the context of Chinese syncretism cf. Lee 2000:31f. and Yü 2001:407f. (Chapter 10: Feminine Forms of Kuan-yin in Late Imperial China).

²³. As said by Meissig 2005:137 in relation to the *Foguoji*.

²⁴. Referred to in Deeg 2005:572. Concerning Gunabhadra's relation with Faxian cf. Glass 2010.

²⁵. *Gaoseng Zhuan* 《高僧傳》, ed. by Tang 1996:131.

²⁶. Illustration from Schlingloff 1982:58.



Abb. 3. Gebet der Seeleute um Hilfe im Seemon an Avalokitesvara; Kultbild-Relief im Ausangabod.
(Detail); ca. 4. Jh. n. Chr.

For future studies on the travel journals of Chinese pilgrims to India, such as Faxian, Xuanzang (玄奘) and Yijing (義淨), their relation with the canonical scriptures should be taken more into account, as most of the scriptures were thoroughly studied by these learned monks.²⁷

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